

“THOSE ARE THE HIGH-FLYING CRANES”

By J. BURTON

These words are linked with what Sir William Muir referred to as “one of the strangest episodes in the life of the Prophet”,¹ the so-called “lapse” or temporary concession to Arabian polytheism.

The basic story is best told in Muir’s version:²

The aim of Mahomet had been the regeneration of his people. But he had fallen miserably short of it. The conversion of forty or fifty souls ill compensated the bitter alienation of the whole community. His heart was vexed, and his spirit chafed by the violent opposition of the most respected and influential chiefs. The prospect was dark; to the human eye, hopeless. Sad and dispirited, the Prophet longed for reconciliation, and cast about how it could be effected. On a certain day the chief men of Mekka, assembled in a group beside the Kaaba, discussed, as was their custom, the affairs of the city. Mahomet appeared, and seating himself by them in a friendly manner, began to recite in their hearing Sura LIII. The chapter opens with a description of the first visit of Gabriel to Mahomet...and then unfolds a second vision of that angel, at which certain heavenly mysteries were revealed. The passage is as follows:

He also saw him at another descent
By the Lote-tree at the furthest boundary,
Near to which is the paradise of rest.
When the Lote-tree covered that which it
covered His sight turned not aside,
neither did it wander.
And verily he beheld some of the greatest
signs of the Lord.
And see ye not Lat and Ozza
And Manat the third besides?

When he had reached this verse, the devil suggested to Mahomet an expression of thoughts which had long possessed his soul; and put into his mouth words of reconciliation and compromise such as he had been yearning that God might send unto his people, namely:

These are exalted Females,
And verily their intercession is to be hoped for.

¹ *The Life of Mahomet* (London, 1877), p. 86.

² *Ibid.*

³ But the word *sidra* is accusative! (v. 16).

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The Coreish were astonished and delighted with this acknowledgement of their deities; and as Mahomet wound up the Sura with these closing words,

Wherefore bow down before God and serve Him,

the whole assembly prostrated themselves with one accord on the ground and worshipped. Walid alone, unable from the infirmities of age to bow down, took a handful of earth and worshipped, pressing it to his forehead.

Thus all the people were pleased at that which Mahomet had spoken, and they began to say: "Now we know that it is the Lord alone that giveth life and taketh it away, that createth and supporteth. And as for these our goddesses, they make intercession with Him for us; wherefore, as thou hast conceded unto them a portion, we are content to follow thee." But their words disquieted Mahomet, and he retired to his house. In the evening, Gabriel visited him; and the prophet (as was his wont) recited the Sura unto him. And Gabriel said: "What is this that thou hast done? Thou hast repeated before the people words that I never gave unto thee." So Mahomet grieved sore, and feared the Lord greatly; and he said: "I have spoken of God that which He hath not said." But the Lord comforted His prophet and restored his confidence, and cancelled the verse, and revealed the true reading thereof (as it now stands), namely:

And see ye not Lat and Ozza,
And Manat the third besides?
What! shall there be male progeny unto you,
and female unto Him? That were indeed an
unjust partition!
They are naught but names which ye and your
fathers have invented, etc.

Muir continues to point out that:¹ "Pious Mussulmans of after days, scandalized at the lapse of their Prophet, into so flagrant a concession, would reject the whole story." But the authorities are, in his view, "too strong to be impugned". It is hardly possible, he argues, to conceive how the tale, if not in some shape or other founded on truth, could ever have been invented. "The stubborn fact remains, and is by all admitted, that the first refugees did return about this time from Abyssinia; and that they returned in consequence of a rumour that Mecca was converted. To this fact the narratives of Wackidi and Tabari afford the only intelligible clue."

There the matter has rested for almost a century. The story of

¹ *Loc. cit.* p. 88.

Muhammad's "lapse and temporary concession to the polytheism of the Meccans" has been accepted as historically "true" by writer after writer up to and including our own day. The solitary exception to the general acceptance of the tale has been Caetani,¹ and by considering the analysis presented in the second edition of *Geschichte des Qorans*² of the objections raised by Caetani we shall be guided to the method by which we now propose to show reason why this story must be decisively rejected once and for all.

The "lapse", in Muir's view,³ "had been no sudden event, nor was it a concession won by surprise, or an error of the tongue committed unawares, and immediately withdrawn". Nor is it at all⁴ "necessary that we should literally adopt the exculpatory version of Mahometan tradition; or seek, in a supernatural interposition, the explanation of actions to be equally accounted for by the natural workings of the Prophet's mind". Both for Muir, and for Sprenger,⁵ the lapse was a calculated and cynical act of expediency, and as the reconciliation with the heathen must have lasted for some time, it must, to outward appearance, have been consolidated and complete.

Caetani's impression, on the other hand, was that here we have to do with a later fabrication,⁶ partly because the *isnāds* of the various versions of the tale merit little confidence, but primarily because, had these *ḥadīths* even a degree of historical basis, Muhammad's reported conduct on this occasion would have given the lie to the whole of his previous prophetic activity. Not too much weight is to be given, in Schwally's view, to Caetani's doubts about the *isnāds* of the numerous *ḥadīths* on the story, since the later scholars, while ostensibly questioning the validity of the "authorities", were in fact simply rationalizing their determination to reject the *content* of the *ḥadīths* for doctrinal reasons of their own. Admittedly also, *ḥadīths* might involve fictitious elements of detail or bear in their numerous variant forms clear mutual contradiction on minor matters and yet rest upon a core of underlying historical truth. The consideration that the stories be *a priori* rejected for the reason that Muhammad would scarcely have so flagrantly compromised his impassioned

¹ L. Caetani, *Annali dell' Islam* (Milan, 1906), I, 279-81.

² I, 101-3 (hereafter cited as *Gd Q*).

³ *Loc. cit.* p. 88.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ A. Sprenger, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammed* (Berlin, 1862), II, 19 ff.

⁶ *Gd Q*, *loc. cit.* p. 101.

insistence upon monotheism is to be modified, Schwally argues, by recalling that the inflexible monotheism normally attributed to the prophet's message was not so central to it as is often supposed. The chief argument against Caetani, however, is his inability to suggest the motive which had impelled the authors of the tale to invent a fiction which necessarily must cast Muḥammad into such an uncomplimentary role. The story could thus not have been concocted by Muslims, nor even foisted upon them by heretics of the most extreme sort, for how then are we to explain its unhesitating adoption by respected orthodox figures? This argument has been taken up by later writers, for example, by Guillaume:¹ "It is impossible to suggest a motive that would induce them to write such a story about the prophet unless it were true... if historical evidence is to be given any value, we must hold that Muḥammad pronounced these words in the middle of Sūra 53. Whether they were even existent in a written copy is impossible to say."

In similar vein, W. Montgomery Watt writes:² "Muḥammad must have publicly recited the satanic verses as part of the Qur'ān; it is unthinkable that the story could have been invented by Muslims, or foisted upon them by non-Muslims."

Far, however, from being unthinkable, it has now become possible both to establish that the story is indeed the invention of Muslims and to identify the motive that compelled them to invent it.

Muir had relied chiefly upon Ṭabarī's narrative and the first observation to be made about Ṭabarī's use of these *ḥadīths* is that he places them not in the discussion of Sūra LIII which they are alleged to concern, but in his discussion of Sūra XXII, 52.³ The outstanding significance of the latter passage to the Muslim exegetes consists in its employment of the root *n.s.kh*. For this was the term selected by the scholarship to represent their concept of abrogation in the various Islamic theories on the "*nāsikh* and the *mansūkh*".⁴

The formulations of these theories are many and far from agreed⁵ and the story of their elaboration is a stormy chapter in

¹ A. Guillaume, *Islam* (Harmondsworth, 1954), p. 187.

² W. Montgomery Watt, *Muḥammad at Mecca* (Oxford, 1953), p. 103 (cf. *Shorter E.I.* p. 396).

³ *His Tafsīr* (Bulāq, 1914), xvii, 185 ff.

⁴ See my forthcoming study: *Al-Nāsikh wa-al-Mansūkh*.

⁵ A useful summary of the scope of the subject is provided by Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, Naw' 47.

the history of the Islamic sciences, but the majority of the scholars, Sunnī and Shi'ī alike, were finally to accept at least one doctrine in common: that certain verses of our present Qur'ān were revealed in order to supersede the rulings of certain other verses also recorded in our Qur'ān texts: *naskh al-ḥukm dūna al-tilāwa*, i.e. the abrogation of the rulings of the earlier verse, without, however, the removal of its wording.

Nöldeke was aware of a second alleged mode of abrogation, sc. *naskh al-ḥukm wa-al-tilāwa*, the removal of *both* the ruling and the wording of part of the original text of the revealed Qur'ān, and devoted a complete section of his work to the examination (and rejection) of some dozen forms of words alleged by the Muslims to belong to this category.¹ The two alleged phenomena are obviously different in kind. In the first, a verse still extant in the texts, is held to be a dead letter, its legislative faculty voided; while, in the second, the so-called "verse" has simply been omitted from the texts, to indicate the more forcibly the suppression of its ruling.

When these ideas were first propounded within Islam is not yet clear, but the elaboration of the theories is datable with certainty to at least the latter half of the second century after Muḥammad, when Shāfi'ī, in his *Risāla*² and in the somewhat later³ *Ikhtilāf al-Ḥadīth*⁴ was applying his considerable talents to resolving the serious problem of the apparent discrepancies between certain Qur'ānic verses and others; between certain *ḥadīths* and others, and, most serious of all, between certain Qur'ānic verses and certain *ḥadīths*.

Arguing determinedly that any verbal discrepancies between the Qur'ān and the reported sayings or reports of the practice of Muḥammad—the Sunna of the Prophet—were merely illusory and could always be removed on the basis of a satisfactory understanding of the mechanism of revelation and the function of the prophet-figure,⁵ Shāfi'ī set his face decidedly against any acceptance of the idea then current that in all such cases either the Qur'ān had abrogated the Sunna, or the Sunna the Qur'ān. As a legal scholar, Shāfi'ī was concerned with the *contents* of the

¹ *GdQ*, I, 234-35.

² Printed as the first part of the *K. al-Ummi* (Bulāq, 1321), see pp. 16-19, 21-2 and 35-8.

³ For this dating cf. J. Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford, 1950), p. 330.

⁴ Printed on the margin of the *K. al-Ummi*, VII.

⁵ *Risāla*, pp. 17-18.

documents that had survived. He shows no interest in the type of theoretical questions leading to the postulation of the existence of a hypothetical "proto-Qur'ān" to account for the presence at one time in the Qur'ān of verses no longer surviving. He was none the less forced on one question—the much-debated definition of the minimum number of sucklings required to set up a bar to marriage—to posit the revelation to Muhammad of a verse on this topic, which, however, was not to be found in the Qur'ān texts of his day.¹

There thus emerged a third mode of abrogation: *naskh al-tilāwa dūna al-hukm*—the non-survival in our texts of an original Qur'ān wording, with, however, the continuing validity of the legislative force of its "revealed" contents.

Those scholars who accepted with equanimity the notion that the Qur'ān might abrogate the Sunna, or the Sunna the Qur'ān (and Ṭabarī is to be reckoned in their number)² felt themselves to be under no obligation to consider this third mode of Qur'ānic abrogation. Their concern was thus with only two alleged Qur'ānic phenomena—the setting aside of the ruling of one verse by that of another where both have survived in the documents; and the simple non-survival of both the wording and the ruling of an allegedly revealed element of the original Qur'ān.³

There is some evidence that of these two alleged phenomena, the first—*naskh al-hukm dūna al-tilāwa*—attracted the reasonable question: "Why was not the superseded verse simply omitted if, as the majority maintained, it were really part of the divine purpose to suspend its legislative force?"

Thus, 'Abdallāh b. al-Zubair is alleged⁴ to have accosted 'Uthmān b. 'Affān, the supposed collector of the Qur'ān texts, and to have asked him why he had included: "And those of you who die and leave widows, a bequest in favour of the widow of twelve months' financial maintenance and accommodation",⁵ when the verse was held to have been abrogated by: "And those of you who die and leave widows, the widows shall observe themselves for four months and ten nights."⁶ 'Uthmān could

¹ *R. al-Umm*, v, 23 ff.; vii, 208.

² Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* (ed. Shākir), viii, 86, top.

³ *Ibid.* ii, 479–80. Cf. Aḥmad b. 'Alī Jassāṣ, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* (Cairo, 1928, 4 vols.), i, 67.

⁴ Suyūṭī, *Itqān* (Cairo, 1948), i, 62.

⁵ Q. ii, 240.

⁶ Q. ii, 234.

only reply that he had included it because he knew it to be "part of the Qur'ān"!

Clearly the Qur'ān has a dual character; it is both source and document.

To this same question: What is the point of leaving the wording of a verse, if its ruling be suspended (in other words, what is the difference between *naskh al-ḥukm dūna al-tilāwa*, and *naskh al-ḥukm wa-al-tilāwa*)? Suyūṭī himself¹ ventures to reply that the Qur'ān was revealed so that its rulings might be known and their implementation rewarded; but that the Qur'ān is also recited with reverence, since it is the word of God, for whose recitation the pious Muslim is likewise rewarded. Further, to leave the wording, following the abrogation of the ruling, was to provide for men a constant reminder of the compassion and mercy shown by their gracious Lord Who had lightened the burden of some of His previous requirements.

Ṭabarī similarly addressed himself to this disturbing question in an attempt to answer it syllogistically.² The verse whose ruling has been lifted from our shoulders, is *as good as* verbally removed from the texts also, in so far as its ruling no longer is operative.³ To that extent it is analogous to other Qur'ān verses, concerning which we know from *ḥadīth* reports that they have been removed from the Qur'ān texts, in which they originally appeared.⁴ It is all one whether an abrogated verse perish, or be crased or forgotten, or whether it be suffered to remain in the documents—in either case we are agreed that the verse is abrogated.⁵ This discussion occurs in the course of Ṭabarī's analysis of the Qur'ānic verse which, since at least Shāfi'i's day, has been traditionally adduced as the Qur'ānic "proof" of the scholars' arguments on behalf of the legitimacy of the abrogation phenomena.

In Q. II, 106, it is alleged, God Himself bears testimony to the view that whatsoever verse He abrogated,⁶ or consigned to oblivion, He had brought one better than it, or similar to it. It is, however, indisputably clear that in this very verse the Arabic root *n.s. kḥ.* cannot possibly have the meaning traditionally assigned to it by the Muslims (sc. to replace) since that would involve the meaningless tautology that whatsoever verse God replaced He would replace.

¹ *Op. cit.* II, 23.

² *Ibid.* p. 471.

³ *Ibid.* p. 472.

⁴ *Op. cit.* (ed. Shākir), II, 471-83.

⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 479-80.

⁶ *mā naskḥ.*

There has thus been a considerable tradition of disagreement among the scholars over the alleged "meaning in the language" of this root. Some have insisted that it means: nullification (*ibṭāl*); others that it means replacement (*ibdāl*).¹ The root occurs twice in the Qur'ān, and it is the second context, Q. xxii, 52, which leaves no possible doubt that the meaning is nullification,² both here and in Q. ii, 106. It is at Q. xxii, 52 that Ṭabarī introduced the *ḥadīths* on the alleged "strange episode" in the life of the Prophet.

Q. xxii, 52 reads: "And We have not sent before thee any apostle nor any prophet, but that when he longed(?),³ Satan cast suggestions into his longing(?). But God shall cancel that which Satan suggests. Then shall God establish His revelations."

The exegetes have long given rein to a strong predilection for reference to concrete historical occasions to facilitate the interpretation of the Qur'ān's frequently oblique utterances, and in this instance, the suggestions that Satan is supposed to have "cast into the longing(?)" of Muḥammad are the so-called "satanic verses".

There is no questioning, in Ṭabarī's view,⁴ that "the verses which God announces that He will establish are the verses of His (own) revelation". It is equally clear to Ṭabarī that the matter which Satan had cast *into the divine revelation* (I)⁵ is that concerning which God announces that "He will *n.s.kh.* (suppress) it. God will then establish His authentic revelation by *n.s.kh.* (removing) that (satanic) matter from it". It was solely in order to justify these interpretations of what this verse was thought to state that Ṭabarī introduced the infamous *ḥadīths* alleging Muḥammad's incredible compact with the Meccans.

The verse speaks of the *tamannī* (longing?)⁶ of the prophet. According to the urging of the reports, this referred to Muḥammad's solicitude for the conversion of his countrymen. His love for them, and his frustration at their heedlessness to his warnings and his message, together with his fear for their

¹ The conflicting views and supporting arguments are most conveniently assembled in Muḥammad b. Mūsā Hamadhānī, *K. al-I'tihār fī al-nāsikh wa-al-mansūkh min al-āthār* (Hayderabad, 1319), pp. 4-5.

² A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1938), p. 279, shows that the original sense of the root *n.s.kh.* in the cognate language is "to remove".

³ *tamannā*.

⁴ *Tafsīr* (Bulāq), xvii, 190.

⁵ My italics.

⁶ But cf. Q. iv, vi. 117-19 and Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* (ed. Shākir), ix, 207-14.

impending fate were supposed to have outweighed his scruples, overcome his fear of God, and impelled him mendaciously to attribute to his divine informant words of his own he had been given no warrant to utter. Such a calculated fraud, if it had ever occurred, would not merely have given the lie to all his previous claims to be a genuine prophet, but would certainly have finished him for the future.

Not surprisingly some scholars have attempted to soften down these *ḥadīths* and have argued that, overcome by his intense "longing", Muḥammad had, in a moment of inattention,¹ given out as coming from God words, either of his own invention,² or familiar to him, from the heathen ceremonies of his compatriots.³ If anything of the kind had occurred it must weaken for the future his claims to be a genuine prophet, and considerably reduce men's confidence in the divine origin of his subsequent utterances, including what he was ultimately to allege to be the "true reading" of Sūra LIII, following God's suppression of the spurious verses, now alleged to have been insinuated by Satan.⁴

Further modifications of the *ḥadīths* in the sense (1) that Muḥammad was unaware that he was uttering these verses; (2) that Satan, impersonating Gabriel had delivered the verses to Muḥammad; (3) that *not* Muḥammad but Satan had uttered the verses, and (being invisible) thereby misled the Meccans into believing that they had been revealed to Muḥammad; and (4) that some satanic (or human) enemy of Muḥammad, imitating his voice, had uttered the verses to discredit him,⁵ were to fare no better among the Muslims, in the face of the doctrines of the divine protection which God afforded both to His Holy Book, and to His prophet. This was why scholars like Qurṭubī and Baidāwī scornfully rejected the legend, not just because they were "pious Mussulmans", but because, as sensible men, they detected the logical impossibility of the stories.

Qurṭubī was to accept a modified form of the tale, but only in a version so distorted that it would in no wise affect the authenticity of Sūra LIII, which in any event had been revealed in its divinely approved form "somewhat earlier than the events here

¹ Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān* (Cairo, 1372/1952), XII, 80.

² Tabarī (Bulāq), XVII, 187.

³ Qurṭubī, *loc. cit.* p. 84.

⁴ Baidāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl* (Cairo [Bulāq?], 1305), II, 447.

⁵ The various constructions are reviewed by Qurṭubī, *loc. cit.*

alleged"¹ which were now permitted to occur to identify those of his followers who would accept Muḥammad's explanation of the blasphemous imposture. The prophet's reported chagrin might then be seen to have been occasioned by the spread of the lying allegation that he personally had been responsible for the proclamation of the counterfeit verses.

Finally, another *tafsīr* was suggested by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī: that by *gharānīq* is to be understood not a reference to non-existent goddesses, but simply a reference to the angels in Heaven.

This, and the alternative *tafsīrs* simply ignore the total context of Q. LIII.² Ṭabarī, with his *ḥadīths*, has likewise ignored the context in which Q. XXII, 52 occurs. For in the immediately preceding v. 51 we read: "Those who strive to oppose our signs will occupy the Fire," which is set in opposition to v. 50: "Those who believe the warnings and perform good works will enjoy forgiveness." The major part of the Sūra is taken up with dread warnings of the terror of the Final Hour and the reality of the general resurrection to judgement. Throughout, the contrast is starkly drawn between such as heed the prophet's admonitions (vv. 23-4) and those who treat them with contempt (vv. 9; 20-2). There appears to be some suggestion that Muḥammad had a rival for the attention of the people (vv. 3-4; 19), which may possibly be linked with v. 51. Vv. 42-6 remind his hearers that the threatened Hour came at its appointed time to the compatriots of Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Abraham, Lot and Moses, in spite of their having scorned the frequent and grave warnings of the Lord's prophets that come it surely would. To the Arabs of the Ḥijāz likewise, the Hour must surely come. Defiantly they bid Muḥammad bring on the Hour; nothing else will convince them that he speaks the truth. To his repeated insistence that come it must, and soon, they had asked, how soon? "One day in God's reckoning is as a thousand in theirs," is his reply (v. 47). Those who rejected Muḥammad's claims to prophethood will persist in scorning his warnings until too late: the Hour will be upon them, taking them unawares.

Q. XXII, 52 might then represent nothing more serious than merely Muḥammad's rationalization of his confessed inability to be precise as to the exact date of the Final Hour. This he presents as his refusal even to attempt to make any guess. Never before

¹ Qurtūbī, *loc. cit.*

² Especially v. 26: *wa kam min malakin fī al-samāwāt lā tuḡnā shajā'atubum shay'an.*

had prophet or messenger, taunted as Muḥammad has been taunted, been tempted to offer his own human opinion on some matter discoverable only by means of revelation, but that he had laid himself open to be misled into error by Satan. Any attempt on Muḥammad's part to be specific about the date of the Hour must inevitably fail, and had therefore best be avoided, and the challenge of the unbelievers permitted to pass unanswered. They would naturally make capital out of the inability of a self-proclaimed prophet to answer their questions on his own teachings, and this might have its effect upon the weaker among his followers. But such are the trials and temptations God places upon men (vv. 53-4).

That no human being, not even a prophet, knows the Hour is a frequent Qur'ānic assertion: "They will ask you about the Hour, when it will come. Say: 'The knowledge thereof is only with my Lord. None but God will manifest it at its time.' It will not come but unexpected. They ask you about it, *as if you were solicitous about it*. Say: 'Knowledge of it is with God alone, but most people are unaware.'"¹

Had Q. xxii, 52 referred in general terms to the divine suppression of something not originally given out as revealed, but merely to something such as might be uttered by Muḥammad, or any other prophet, as his personal opinion, the most one might say of it is that it shows that God *n.s.kh.* (suppresses) the erroneous words of a human. That would have no bearing on the question of the divine removal of matter once authentically revealed (or given out as such), still less on its replacement by the divine agent.

The technical sense of the term *n.s.kh.* was restricted by Ṭabarī himself in his work, unhappily lost, the *K. al-Bayān 'an usūl al-aḥkām*,² by the rule: "There is no *mansūkh* other than a ruling divinely imposed."

Thus, for Qur'ānic replacement to be properly spoken of, either both elements—the substitute (*nāsikh*) and the replaced (*mansūkh*)—must be traceable to revealed texts, or in the view of some, i.e. those who accept that the Qur'ān might abrogate, or be abrogated by the Sunna, at least one of the two statements, whether the *nāsikh* or the *mansūkh*, should be Qur'ānic, and the other acceptably reported as a statement by the prophet. For example, the alteration of the *qibla* is an attested instance of abrogation admitted by all, although, since the imposition of the

¹ Q. vii, 187.

² *Tafsīr* (ed. Shākir), II, 535.

now-abandoned Jerusalem *qibla* is not traceable in the Qur'ān, some regard the substitution of the Meccan *qibla* (Q. II, 142; 149-50) for the *qibla* previously instituted by the prophet as a case in which the Qur'ān had abrogated the Sunna of the prophet.¹ Others, taking a more restricted view of the abrogation phenomenon, argue that the Jerusalem *qibla* had not been merely some personal decision of Muḥammad's, but had been, if not instituted verbally by the Qur'ān, certainly endorsed by it (Q. II, 143). Other scholars were to require that both *nāsikh* and *mansūkh* be of the "same status", either both Sunna, or both Qur'ān. These identified the *mansūkh* in the case of the *qibla* as Q. II, 113: "To God belong the East and the West, and whithersoever you turn, there is God." This was then set aside by the specific Qur'ānic imposition to face towards Mecca.² The scholars had little difficulty in adducing examples to "prove" that *n. s. kh.* means "to replace".

If by *n. s. kh.* is meant, however, "to suppress", as in for example *naskh al-ḥukm wa-al-tilāwa*, and an instance be adduced in which the term *n. s. kh.* is to be shown to have its technical meaning of removal by God, the matter removed (sc. the *mansūkh*) must be shown to have been of divine or at least prophetic origin. The words purported in the *ḥadīths* to have been uttered by Muḥammad, and to have been referred to in Q. XXII, 52 might thus for the scholars, historically considered, have been of one of three sorts: (1) divine, or at least prophetic revelation; (2) a statement initiated by Muḥammad and subsequently endorsed by the Qur'ān; or (3) his merely private opinion. That they were of the second sort has never been alleged. They might, if ever uttered, have been of the last sort, which also has never been alleged. Only if they had been of the first sort could the claim be sustained that abrogation had here been seen to occur, and hence that the term *n. s. kh.* had in this verse one of its usual technical meanings. There is thus a clear and inescapable contradiction between these *ḥadīths* on Muḥammad's alleged "lapse" and the motive underlying their introduction. For it has never been held that the so-called "satanic verses" had been an authentic divine revelation subsequently rescinded. Nor, for the purposes of discussion, would it be psychologically possible for Muslims to view the devil and

¹ See Taftazānī, *K. al-Tawḍīḥ* (Kazān, 1884), pp. 416 ff.

² The various arguments are reviewed by Ibn al-Jawzī, *Naḥāsikh al-Qur'ān*, MS. Istanbul, Topkapusaray, Ahmed III, no. 192.

the deity as partners engaged in a joint act of divine abrogation. The very suggestion has been denounced as dualism.¹

Some have alleged that *n.s.kh.*, as it affects the Qur'ān, can be established as having occurred by referring to Q. xxii, 52, in which God announced that He would suppress what the devil insinuated into the public recitation of the prophet. But this merely indicates the suppression of that which the devil desires to insinuate. It does not indicate the occurrence of *n.s.kh.* in respect of what God reveals and commands. There is thus, in this verse, no support for the occurrence of *n.s.kh.* in respect of that which in God's sight is the divine truth.²

One could never then adduce Q. xxii, 52 as a Qur'ānic "proof" of the abrogation theories. Q. xxii, 52 has, on the other hand, been adduced frequently as a Qur'ānic "proof" that the etymology of the root *n.s.kh.* springs in the language from the concept of removal or suppression.

The peculiarly restricted sense of the term in Q. xxii, 52 was acknowledged by Nishāpūrī³ who commented that in that place, the root *n.s.kh.* meant only *izāla*, i.e. removal or suppression, the word carrying only its bare "linguistic" value, as opposed to the "technical" usage of the Uṣūlīs, who employed the term with a methodological reference to mean "substitution".

This means that in the Qur'ān, and hence "in Arabic", the root *n.s.kh.* means one thing, sc. removal, but that as a technical term it means something quite different, sc. replacement.⁴

The major attraction Q. xxii, 52 held for the scholars was that it provided a Qur'ānic, and therefore irrefutable, evidence in favour of the suppression or removal etymology. Analysis of the sources makes it equally clear that the Qur'ānic prop of the alternative etymology—the etymology of the Uṣūlīs—was to be found at Q. xvi, 101: *idhā baddalnā āya*.⁵

Nöldeke-Schwally were aware of the threefold modality of the abrogation theories⁶ but failed to observe firstly that the formulae: (i) *naskh al-hukm wa-al-tilāwa*; (ii) *naskh al-hukm dūma al-tilāwa*; (iii) *naskh al-tilāwa dūma al-hukm* united three phenomena of

¹ Qurṭubī, *loc. cit.* p. 84.

² Abū Muḥammad b. Abī Ṭālib al-Makkī, *K. al-Nāsikh wa-al-Mansūkh*, MS. Istanbul, Süleymaniye, No. 305, *bāb jawāz al-naskh*.

³ His *Tafsīr*, printed on the margin of the Būlāq 1328 Ṭabari, *loc. cit.*

⁴ Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Sarakhsī, *Uṣūl* (Haiderabad, 1372), II, 33; Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Jaṣṣās, *op. cit.* I, 67.

⁵ See Pazdawī, *Uṣūl*, *bāb boyān al-tabāṭīl wa-huwa al-naskh*. Cf. *Itqān*, Naw' 47, and Ṭabari, *Tafsīr*, *ad loc.*

⁶ *Op. cit.* I, 33.

essentially different character, and had been worded in such a manner as to disguise the mobility in the hands of the scholars of the meaning of the technical term *n.s.kh.* This in nos. (i) and (iii) refers to the absence of certain materials from our Qur'ān texts, alleged to have been divinely removed.

In no. (ii) the formula acknowledged the presence in our Qur'ān texts of certain redundant materials, alleged, however, to have been superseded.

Secondly, they failed also to observe that this variability of the meaning of the term *n.s.kh.* (removal, replacement) depends upon whether, in any one instance, one regards the Qur'ān as a document (nos. (i) and (ii)) or simply as the alleged source of some legal prescription nowhere referred to in the Qur'ān (no. (iii)). That much is clear from the antithesis in the formulae between *ḥukm* (ruling) and *tilāwa* (text). It was found necessary to introduce both terms into the formulae to overcome the difficulty that the term *n.s.kh.*—which to the Uṣūlis really meant "replace"—was imparting to formula (i) a quite inappropriate meaning. Hence in (i) the removal of both wording and ruling; (ii) the removal of the ruling *but not* the wording; (iii) the removal of the wording *but not* the ruling we see the compromise achieved between the "linguistic" meaning of "removal" and the "technical" meaning of "replacement".

Formula (iii) originated from a generalized demand that the current Islamic doctrine be seen to derive from the Qur'ān.¹ That demand, in turn, was dependent on the view that only the Qur'ān can abrogate the Qur'ān, developed in those circles to whom the term *n.s.kh.* meant "to replace". That this was the direction taken by the theoretical developments is further shown by the circumstance that whereas Ṭabarī, one of those scholars who accepted that the Sunna might abrogate the Qur'ān, did not require to postulate the type (iii) abrogation, Shāfi'ī, whose view on the question we have seen, could not avoid doing so.

Unaware of the extent of these specialized disputes within the science of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, Nöldeke-Schwally obscured the distinctions between the "abrogated materials" examined in *GdQ.* I, 234-55, since only their nos. 1-6 and 8-10 are alleged instances of type (i). Nos. 7 and 11, however, are alleged instances of type (iii). As such, they reflect legal doctrines nowhere adumbrated in our texts of the Qur'ān. Hence the invention of appropriate "verses" alleged to have been revealed to Muḥammad, and to

¹ Cf. the pertinent statement by Shāfi'ī, *Risāla*, p. 16.

have once stood in the Qur'ān, but to have been "withdrawn" by the divine agent prior to the collection of the texts of the revelation into a single volume during the reign of one of the Prophet's successors.

I propose to argue in a separate article that a further consequence of the elaboration of the theories of abrogation has been the necessary removal of Muhammad from the Muslim accounts of the history of the collection of the Qur'ān texts. Since no verse of the Qur'ān whose ruling was held to have remained valid until and beyond the death of Muhammad could be thought to have been excluded from the Qur'ān if the texts had been collected in Muhammad's lifetime, it follows from the existence in the theory of formula (iii) that for the Muslims, the Qur'ān could have been collected only after the prophet's death.

The scholars thus had two desiderata, firstly, to "prove" that the root *n.s.kh.* means *to replace*, and secondly, to "prove" that it also means *to withdraw*.

Ideally, both should be "proved" from the Qur'ān. To "prove" the replacement meaning, scholars relied upon Q. II, 106, in association with Q. XVI, 101. But in Q. II, 106: *mā nansakh min āya aw nunsī-hā na'ti bi-khairin min-hā aw mithli-hā*, the terms *nansakh* and *nunsī* are clearly synonymous, in the sense of "suppress/remove" since it is only the clause *na'ti bi-khairin min-hā aw mithli-hā* that gives rise to any thought of "replacement".

The term *n.s.kh.* had become, at least as early as the time of Shāfi'i, restricted in the usage of the Uṣūlis to the technical sense of abrogation and used exclusively in the sense of formula (ii). As Shāfi'i expressed it, "No imposition is ever abrogated but another is promulgated in its stead."¹

Further Qur'ānic support was being at the same time sought for this sense of the term, by appeal to the Q. XVI, 101 term, *tabdīl*, now adduced as a synonym of the term *n.s.kh.*, derived from Q. II, 106.²

Formulas (i) and (iii) had acquired a certain degree of apparent Qur'ānic support from the Q. II, 106 term, *nunsī* "We cause it to be forgotten". Given the divine causation of such forgetting, there was little difficulty in representing the phenomena alluded to in formulas (i) and (iii) as elements in the divine revelatory activities.³

¹ *Risāla*, p. 17.

² See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzi, *Mafāṭīḥ al-Ghaib* (Husainiyya Press, Cairo, n.d.), I, 434 ff.

³ Ṭūsī, *Tibyān* (Najaf, 1376/1957), I, 393 ff.

Besides, there are strong grounds for suspecting that the reading *nansi* is a development from an earlier reading *nansa*. Such suspicions are supported by the existence of a parallel "variant reading" tradition, *nansa*, meaning "We defer". Only *nansa* could simultaneously underlie both variants, especially since the reading *nansa* is rationalized as requiring the insertion of the *hamza* which the Qur'ān script is alleged to have initially lacked.

For Shāfi'i, again, the application of this sense to Q. II, 106 conveyed the divine announcement that in a number of instances where the Qur'ān spoke on specific matters, the divine revelation embodying the *final* ruling was to be deferred until a future occasion, when it would be revealed in a later verse.¹ One example of such "deferment" is to be seen in Q. IV, 15: "And those of your women who commit abomination, seek the testimony of four of your number against them; if they should testify confine the women in chambers *until* death take them or *until* God appoint a process."

The "process" here promised was later "appointed" in the revelation of the stoning penalty.² The stoning penalty, *and not the Qur'ān*, was thus the historical source of the "stoning verse".

Ṭabarī was to have difficulty with those who denied that any part of the Qur'ān might be held ever to have been forgotten and thus lost, or to have been withdrawn, unless it had been *nusikha*. By their use of this term his opponents might well have intended "replaced", but Ṭabarī took them to mean "removed".³ He therefore argued that it is immaterial whether one read *nansi* or *nansa*, provided only that one connected *nansi* etymologically not with *nasiya* meaning "to forget", but with *nasiya* meaning *to leave*. He used a further argument based on the Q. II, 106 apodosis "We shall bring one better than it"; this was to be interpreted in the light of the doctrine that, being wholly the Word of God, no verse in the Qur'ān can be "better" than any other verse. "Better than" can thus refer only to the rulings arising out of the verses. Ṭabarī thus interprets Q. II, 106, as: Whatsoever verse of the Qur'ān, having replaced its ruling, We then verbally withdraw⁴ or leave (where it is in the Qur'ān) We shall bring a ruling which is either similar, or better in that it is

¹ *Risāla*, p. 17: *nansa* means *ta'khīr al-inzāl*; cf. Baiḍāwī, who repeats this definition in his *tafsīr* to Q. II, 106.

² *Risāla*, pp. 21, 36.

³ *Tafsīr* (ed. Shākir), II, 479-80.

⁴ *Tafsīr* (ed. Shākir), II, 479-80.

easier of performance, or if more onerous, better in terms of reward.

The implication of this is that *tabdīl al-āya* was never intended. What was announced by the verse was *tabdīl al-ḥukm*.

Despite its clumsiness, Ṭabarī's *ta'wīl* points to formulas (i) and (ii). Because of the meticulous care which he took with his introductory definitions, we can trace part of this *ta'wīl* to the vocabulary of Q. XXII, 52. The utility to Ṭabarī of formula (i), *naskh al-ḥukm wa-al-tilāwa*, was that he was able to refer to *ḥadīths* concerning the alleged "withdrawal" of a "verse" said to have been revealed on the occasion of the Bi'r Ma'ūna massacre—*GdQ*'s no. 6—as one instance of Qur'ān material which had indisputably been omitted from the *muṣḥaf* drawn up and disseminated by Muḥammad's successors. The utility to him of Q. XXII, 52 was that it afforded him a Qur'ānic—and hence, a "stronger"—proof for the Uṣūlīs' suppression or removal etymology of the term *n.s. kh.* as employed in all three compromise formulae.

We learn incidentally from Ṭabarī that formula (ii), the chief concern of the Uṣūlīs, had been subject to attack, thus confirming what we have already seen in the 'Abdallāh b. al-Zubair *ḥadīth* noticed above. Using now such instances as the Bi'r Ma'ūna "verse", Ṭabarī devised an analogy. There are Qur'ān verses which have been omitted from the *muṣḥaf*; both their wording and their ruling have thus been left or abandoned. Other verses there are whose rulings alone have indisputably been left or abandoned, and then replaced. In such cases as these, where the original rulings alone have been abandoned and the wording of the verses left in the Qur'ān, the wording also might as well have been abandoned, i.e. left out of the Qur'ān. To Muslim scholars, agreed that the rulings of these verses had been replaced, the retention in the Qur'ān of the original wording is immaterial. None would now insist on basing the practice on such verses. The rulings had been left or abandoned or replaced, and the wording left or *unaltered*. Such verses are "as good as withdrawn"; their wording is already quasi-withdrawn. All this is felt to be in line with the meaning of Q. II, 106.

No part of the Book of God may now be said to have been simply forgotten, for this would be taken to imply lack of due thought on the part of the forefathers for its scrupulous preservation, as well as absence of divine guarantee for its transmission. One therefore departs further and further from the

forgetting interpretation of *nansa*. The meaning of the Q. II, 106 term *nansa/nunsi/nansa*¹ can then be taken to be a divine reference to formula (ii), a change in the ruling without the removal of the wording.

Amid the welter of competing "readings" and conflicting etymologies and interpretations proposed for Q. II, 106, a verse which was to form the basis for a completely separate new Islamic science,² in the elaboration of which many other equally fundamental doctrines were to play a formative role, by successively modifying the scholars' attempts at definitions, the term *nunsi* was to lose for many its connexion with the concept of forgetting, and took on instead the emphasis of "withdrawal by divine agency".² Similarly, the term *n.s.kh.* was assuming the sense of "to replace". This produced satisfactory results only for formula (ii). For the remaining formulae (i) *naskh al-hukm wa-al-tilāwa*, and (iii) *naskh al-tilāwa dūna al-hukm*, the effect of the "*n.s.kh.* = replace" equation would have been unsatisfactory. Something of this effect might perhaps be discernible in the dispute referred to by Ṭabarī, whose opponents could well have been objecting that nothing has been omitted from the Qur'ān without having been *replaced*. Alternatively, they could equally have been objecting that nothing had been omitted from the Qur'ān, without thereby ceasing to have any legislative force. It all depends on what they meant by *mansūkh*. From his reply, we know that he took them to mean that nothing had been omitted without being *verbally* replaced. In all such instances of the formula (i) type of *naskh* as have become celebrated through constant reference, the Qur'ānic wording has not been replaced. Nor in the principal instances of the formula (iii) mode of *naskh*, *āyat al-riḍā'* and *āyat al-rajm*, had the wording been divinely withdrawn, for it continued to supply the quasi-Qur'ānic basis of the alleged *Sharī'a* ruling. The *tilāwa* of each of these verses was known throughout the Islamic world. It had clearly not been withdrawn—it had merely been "omitted from the *muṣḥaf*".

Of the six classes of Qur'ānic *mansūkh*, the first is that whose wording has been divinely withdrawn from the *muṣḥaf*, without a verbal replacement; the wording continues to be known to the Muslims, but their *ijmā'* as to the contents of the *muṣḥaf* does not permit the recital of the wording on the basis of its being part of the Qur'ān text. The ruling, however, remains intact. An example would be *āyat al-rajm*.³

¹ See Hājī Khalifa, sub voce *n.s.kh.*

² Cf. Kashshāf, ad Q. II, 106.

³ Makki, *op. cit.*, bāb *aqṣām al-mansūkh*.

The need was therefore now felt for a Qur'ānic, as opposed to a *ḥadīth*, evidence to establish a further meaning of the term *n.s.kh.*, in the sense of "removal from the *muṣḥaf*". This is especially true in Ṭabarī's case. By his interpolation of the word "ruling" into such Qur'ānic formulae as [the ruling of] "Whatsoever verse We alter, or leave without verbal replacement, We shall bring [a ruling] better than it, or similar to it", he had neutralized two significant theologically based objections. Firstly, that the Qur'ān is the Word of God; the Word of God is eternal, and thus incapable of change. If *naskh* means alteration, the Word of God itself has announced the possibility of its own alteration. This would indicate that the Qur'ān was created.¹ Secondly, that the Qur'ān is the Word of God, and hence perfect. No part of the Word of God can be thought to be superior to another part. Q. II, 106 speaks of bringing a verse better than another.

Over and above this, Ṭabarī required Qur'ānic evidence of the divine withdrawal of some material once in the Qur'ān to establish the base of his analogy that materials treated under the formula *naskh al-ḥukm dūna al-tilāwa* were "as good as withdrawn".

In Q. II, 106, *nansakh* and *nunsi* are clearly synonymous, in the sense of to suppress/remove. Q. II, 106, *nansakh* and Q. XXII, *yansakh* are certainly synonymous. The *ḥadīths* associated with the latter verse were mere inventions introduced to maintain the argument that *naskh* means to remove with specific reference to the wording of a verse. This provided Qur'ānic evidence for the formula *naskh al-ḥukm wa-al-tilāwa* in conditions in which *n.s.kh.* had already become a technical term in the vocabulary of the Uṣūlīs with, however, generally the meaning "to replace", in such formulae as *naskh al-Qur'ān bi-al-Qur'ān*; or *naskh al-Qur'ān bi-al-Sunna*, i.e. *naskh al-ḥukm dūna al-tilāwa*.

In the meantime, the term *nunsi* "We cause to forget", originally substituted in deference to the theological scruples aroused by the reading *nansa* "We forget",² had itself become less clear in consequence of the prevalence of either the more favoured alternative "reading" *nansa* "We defer", or the more favoured alternative etymology *nasiya* = to leave. For Ṭabarī this meant leaving the original wording in the Qur'ān, i.e. *naskh al-ḥukm dūna al-tilāwa*. It must also be borne in mind that Ṭabarī regarded the so-called *Bi'r Ma'īna* and *ibn Adam* "verses" as

¹ This was one of the Mu'tazilī arguments. Cf. Baiḍāwī, *ad loc.*

² I. Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden, 1952), p. 24.

"THOSE ARE THE HIGH-FLYING CRANES"

instances of matter omitted from the *muṣḥaf* but never verbally replaced.¹

Thus, despite the hint of dualism, we find Ṭabarī commenting on Q. xxii, 52 as follows:

The *āyat* concerning which God here announces that He will endorse them are without any doubt, the *āyat* of his revealed Book. It is thus clear that what the devil had cast *into that revealed Book* is precisely what God announces that He has removed from it and suppressed. God then endorsed His book by removing that utterance from it.

An additional subsidiary argument in favour of the contention that there is the close connexion we have suggested between these *ḥadīths* on Muḥammad's "lapse" and the principal Qur'ānic "proof" of one of the theories of abrogation, Q. ii, 106, may be further detected in the wording of one of the "variant readings" of the so-called "satanic verses", which betrays verbal dependence on Q. ii, 106: *tilka al-gharānīq al-'ulā wa-shafū'atubunna turjā mithlubunna lā yunsā*. (*Tafsīr*, Bulāq, *loc. cit.* p. 188.)

There existed therefore a compelling theoretical motive for the invention of these infamous *ḥadīths*. If it be felt that this has now been demonstrated, there should be no further difficulty in suggesting that those *ḥadīths* have no historical basis.

¹ *Tafsīr* (ed. Shākir), ii, 479-80.